

Is \$7 day care a fantasy? Not in La Belle Province [CA] ^[1]

Author: Morrall, Amanda

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EXCERPTS

At informal gatherings of new parents on playdates or at playgrounds around town, there are tales whispered of "\$7-a-day day care" as though a legend from the Brothers Grimm.

Seven-dollar-a-day day care? Yes Virginia, there is such a generous Santa Claus, but you're going to have to move to Quebec to find him.

While the Alberta government delivered an early Christmas present on Oct. 14 in the form of increased childcare subsidies for low and middle income families -- \$7-a-day day care wasn't in the package.

The adjusted income thresholds and increased subsidies are predominately good news for families making less than \$40,000 a year.

The full day-care subsidy for infants is \$575 a month, while the full day-care subsidy for preschool children is \$500.

In Calgary, where full-time day care costs an average of \$625 a month per child, and a nanny is a minimum of \$1,000 per month, these subsidies make for big savings.

But middle income earners making less than \$78,600 a year qualify for a partial subsidy, only \$230 a month in relief -- the equivalent of about four or five days of care for a single child.

It's a far cry from the day-care windfall in La Belle Province.

"It's insane really," says Laurie Gelfand, a new Montreal mother and beneficiary of Quebec's unique universal day-care system.

"I feel very lucky," she adds of her \$150 a month day-care costs.

Gelfand, 34, was mid-way through a master's degree when she became pregnant. She decided early on that day care was the best option for her new daughter Ivy so she could complete her studies without going further into debt.

"I honestly don't know what I'd do if I had to pay \$35 a day," says Gelfand, whose husband works as a freelance writer.

"Likely we would do it but we'd probably have to take out a line of credit or ask for help from our families."

In 1997, the Quebec government of the time introduced what was considered to be a socially progressive, European-style subsidized day-care system in an attempt to alleviate the economic challenges faced by couples having children.

Initially priced at an astonishing \$5 a day, costs were ramped up a couple of years ago to a mere \$7 a day.

The program isn't without controversy. It costs the government an estimated \$1.4 billion a year to run -- an amount critics say is untenable -- and an estimated 40 per cent of the publicly subsidized centres have fallen into deficit situations.

Still, the concept has proven hugely popular and is often regarded as a model by other provinces.

It's become so popular in fact that obtaining one of the 190,000 \$7-a-day placements is like winning a coveted spot on one of those cutthroat reality TV shows.

Gelfand initially planned to take a full year off with her daughter Ivy but when she got a call in April that a spot was available for day care &em; when Ivy was 11 months old -- she leapt at it.

To parents in Calgary, who shell out an average of \$600 a month on day care, waiting-list headaches seem like a small price.

In the northwest community of Tuscany Michelle Frere juggles her two children Tyson and Avery at a weekly playgroup.

Frere had planned to go back to work as a preschool teacher when her son Tyson was a year old, but she unexpectedly found herself pregnant again seven weeks post-partum.

She has been at home with the kids ever since.

Putting her two kids in day care would cost the same amount she'd be earning teaching preschool.

Frere was hoping to see the province use its \$489 million share & allocated in July by the federal government to Alberta -- to create a day-care program similar to the one in Quebec.

Instead, Frere says her husband has taken a second job, designing web pages from home, and she's thinking about taking in a neighbour's child in January to help with the bills.

Critics of Alberta's child-care system are generally applauding the recent changes, but remain concerned about the real value of the subsidies in the absence of rules to prevent day cares from hiking the parent-paid portion of day-care fees.

Public Interest Alberta has long championed improved standards and affordability in child care.

Bill Moore-Kilgannon, executive director of the group, says other provinces, such as Manitoba, have taken steps to ensure day-care centres can't jack up fees over and above the subsidies.

In Alberta, he says, there are no such checks and balances.

He worries this could negate the net gain of increased subsidies and at the same time widen the gap between private and non-profit day-care centres.

"With the majority of child care being delivered by for profit, there's no mechanism in place to ensure that the tax dollars aren't just to increase the profit margins."

Public Interest Alberta, and other parties that have been closely following child-care issues, were also disappointed no money was earmarked to kids, ages six to 12, for whom after-school care has also become a serious problem.

With more money freed up to increase wages for early child-care workers -- average wages are to rise from \$11 to \$14 an hour -- attracting and retaining staff to work with school kids may become even more difficult.

Moore-Kilgannon says fixing the problems that exist in child care in Alberta requires not only capital. He says it takes good management.

"It's significant dollars -- we have a huge opportunity to really build a system. My concern is that because of (the Klein government's) commitment to this ideology of market competition, things are not going to get better over the long-run and potentially could get worse."

- reprinted from the Calgary Herald

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